



National Center on Fathers and Families

BRIEF

NCOFF Briefs provide summaries of literature reviews, research reports, and working papers published by NCOFF and of emerging practice- and policy-focused issues in the field. This Brief, Developing a Model of Reflective Practice for Improving Fathering Programs, written by Glen Palm of St. Cloud State University, is one in a series of NCOFF's working papers designed to expand work in understudied areas. Copies of commissioned papers or other NCOFF reports are available from NCOFF in paper form or on diskette.

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Developing a Model of Reflective Practice for Improving Fathering Programs

Key Findings

- A primary issue for fathering programs is to define good or responsible fathering. A broad conceptual definition of good fathering is needed as a guiding image that establishes a clear set of goals and encompasses various groups of fathers.
- The current attempts to define good fathering as responsible fatherhood or involved fatherhood set clear standards but exclude many fathers in difficult circumstances (e.g. incarceration).
- Generative fathering is presented as a model for good fathering. This model captures the developmental nature of fatherhood and identifies different domains for fathering work that can serve as a basis for setting goals that include all fathers.
- Reflective practice is presented as a model to guide fathering programs in addressing the complex social and family issues that form the context for contemporary fatherhood.
- Reflective practice acknowledges the artistry of competent practitioners who are able to frame problems and implement and improvise program design to provide effective services to fathers and families.
- Reflective practice as applied to practitioners in fathering programs includes three main elements. The first element focuses on the relationships of practitioners to fathers, families, and researchers. The second outlines the characteristics of reflective practice, and the third element identifies salient virtues of practitioners.
- A research agenda to study and support reflective practice is outlined, offering some concrete ideas for engaging practitioners and researchers in mutually respectful collaborations to improve both theory and practice.

Recommendations for Research

- Researchers should work with practitioners to develop a set of quality indicators for fathering programs that could be used for self-assessment
- Researchers can develop methods for studying the development and application of artistry and intuition by practitioners in fathering programs
- Program evaluation is a key area for researchers and practitioners to work together to develop new approaches and tools for evaluating and improving fathering programs.
- Researchers should also study the elements of successful collaboration between practitioners and researchers to better understand how to promote respectful relationships between the two groups.

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

- Practitioners should develop ethical thinking and practice by defining ethical issues and dilemmas in work with fathers and families.
- Practitioners need to identify staff knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are related to reflective practice to begin to set standards for training and staff development.
- Practitioners should explore the concept of generative fathering as a guide for working with fathers towards a more inclusive understanding of good fathering.
- Support for staff development towards reflective practice is an essential component of creating effective fathering programs.

Developing a Model of Reflective Practice for Improving Fathering Programs

The rapid development of fathering programs has been accompanied by renewed efforts to define good fathering (Blankenhorn, 1995; Levine & Pitt, 1995). Programs to promote good fathering have emerged in complex social environments with limited evaluation of effective practice (McBride & Palm, 1992). This paper will address two major issues that fathering programs face in the 1990s. The first issue is the need for a guiding image of good fathering that can be applied to the diverse set of fathering programs that currently exist. The second issue is the identification of effective practice that moves beyond specific case studies to a more general approach to fathering programs that will be useful in guiding practitioners towards good practice. NCOFF's Core Learnings (1995) and Roundtables began to move the field in this direction by outlining important principles and beginning dialogues between practitioners and researchers. This paper presents a framework for reflective practice for fathering programs and outlines an agenda for next steps for researchers and practitioners to take to improve practice in supporting good fathering.

Good Fathering and Higher Standards

A clear conceptual definition of good fathering is essential to guiding effective practices in fathering programs. The term good fathering has been chosen to emphasize the point that the conduct of fatherhood is primarily a moral and ethical issue, not an empirical issue (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1996). Fathering programs by their nature support and teach good fathering. A clear definition of good fathering is necessary in guiding programs and fathers in the development of meaningful goals.

The decade of the 1990s has led to several calls for higher standards for fatherhood. The "raising of standards" for fathers has been a theme promoted by many different leaders and groups, including the Promise-Keepers (1995), Jesse Jackson (1994), Blankenhorn (1995), and the National Fatherhood Initiative. This call for higher standards for fathers can be seen as an attempt to balance the slide towards relativism that was pervasive in the family literature during the

1980s. The danger of this shift is the absolutist tone that comes with a call for higher standards and specific prescriptions for good fathering.

The "Good Family Man"

Blankenhorn (1995) in his social critique of contemporary fatherhood reconstructs "the good family man" as his description of good fathering. The "good family man" must be a provider, protector, partner in the family workload, and a spiritual/moral leader. Blankenhorn's view raises a specific set of standards that incorporates many of the roles fathers have played throughout history (Pleck, 1987). Blankenhorn's image also pushes the definitions of good fathering in an absolutist direction by prescribing roles, family structures, and religious beliefs that appear to exclude many men. The standards are clear, and they portray high expectations and include a number of important functions of good fathering, yet they exclude men who are striving to do good fathering in difficult circumstances.

Responsible Fatherhood

The term "responsible fatherhood" has begun to appear in a number of places (e.g., Levine & Pitt, 1995; Doherty, et. al., 1996) as an explicitly value-laden description of fatherhood. The specificity of the Levine and Pitt (1995) model is another example of the move from empirical description to raising the ethical and moral standards by using value statements to describe specific characteristics of good fathering. The problem with higher standards is that they make judgments that don't always take into account real lives and efforts to be good fathers under a variety of difficult circumstances. They also don't approach fathering as an ongoing developmental process. Higher standards can become a set of rigid roles and role expectations. The young unmarried father who is working hard to be a good father under very difficult circumstances may not meet any of these higher standards for responsible fatherhood. Yet his behavior may reflect important efforts to be a good father. These standards

for responsible fatherhood include an inherent negative bias towards young men, unmarried men, men of color, and unemployed men. The challenge in raising standards is to become more inclusive of real efforts towards good fathering without slipping into relativistic views and slippery individual standards.

Generative Fathering

One of the important learnings about fathering in recent years has been the importance of framing fathering as a developmental process (Newman & Newman, 1988; Cowan, 1988; Palkovitz, 1992; Palm, 1993; Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1997). According to this view, the primary focus of good fathering is on the evolving relationship between father and child, not a static set of roles. The generative fathering definition developed by Dollahite, Hawkins, and Brotherson (1997) is useful for practitioners who are working with fathers who have already failed at one or more of the discrete markers of responsible fatherhood. Generative fathering refers to a developmental process that demands continual efforts towards good fathering. It is not a clear set of roles, and the discrete markers by which responsible fathering can be judged are replaced with more generic domains of work. This concept has some appeal because it keeps a high set of standards visible, yet doesn't set a minimum standard that excludes fathers who may be working towards good fathering after faltering or making some initial mistakes. Generative fathering also suggests that the good family man continues to strive towards a high set of ideals as he and his children grow and change. This definition allows practitioners to clearly identify areas where fathers have been taking some steps towards responsible fatherhood and acknowledge those as indicators of good fathering. It also keeps the standards at a high level so that all men can identify ongoing steps towards good fathering.

Improving Practice in Fathering Programs

The second major issue that faces fathering programs after defining good fathering is the development of effective program practices. The diversity of programs that have developed and the limited evaluation of program outcomes makes this an important focus. There have been some attempts in parent and family education to define best practices (Family Resource Coalition, 1996). Reflective practice as a specific approach to fathering programs appears to be a good match. The diversity and complexity of current family systems creates a myriad of challenges for practitioners who work directly with fathers and their families. The complexity of going beyond the mother-child dyad in parent and family education also creates new ethical dilemmas that might best be addressed by reflective practice. When a young, unmarried father is asked by society to financially support his child, a fathering program must be able to manage a variety of goals, societal assumptions, legal parameters, and complex family relationships. Reflective practice appears to be a good fit for practitioners as an approach to the complex and value-laden terrain of contemporary fatherhood (Schon, 1983).

Model of Reflective Practice for Fathering Programs

The model of the reflective practitioner presented here is an attempt to integrate different aspects of the concept that have emerged through the evolution of the concept of reflective practice. The model also incorporates the author's observations of numerous practitioners and his own clinical practice in fathering programs. There are practitioners who currently work in fathering programs who embody reflective practice as described here. Their work validates this concept as one that sheds new light on the swampworld of practice in fathering programs. The model of reflective practice for fathering programs has three different dimensions. The first dimension addresses relationships between practitioners, fathers, and researchers. The second dimension of the model describes the unique characteristics of reflective practitioners. A third dimension includes a discussion of relevant virtues required for reflective practice in the 1990s.

Practitioner Relationships

The relationship between the practitioner and father may encounter a number of barriers (Johnson & Palm, 1992). One such barrier is fathers' initial uncertainty about making a commitment to the program. It takes time to build a relationship of understanding and mutual respect with fathers. Fathers may also come to the program with a number of problems which they may initially be reluctant to share (Bowman, 1992). Practitioners will need to approach fathers with a sense of respect and acceptance. This model of reflective practice also involves creating a partnership with fathers to define their own goals and shape the program to meet their needs. This partnership is based on shared power and responsibility for the program. The practitioner must engage fathers in this relationship and understand the traditional models of power based on professionalism as a potential barrier.

The second relationship area to consider is the relationship between practitioners and researchers. The practitioner and researcher run into the barriers of their different views of the world (Schon, 1983) and different values. The sense of caring and responsibility that practitioners bring to their relationship with fathers is not present in this set of relationships. The main barrier may be the researcher's model of knowledge hierarchy. This paradigm gives limited credibility to the practitioner's contribution to a knowledge base. The practitioner's artistry (Schon, 1987) or intuition is perceived as second rate compared to the researcher's theoretical and empirical knowledge base. This view creates a tension between practitioners and researchers that can be hard to overcome in forging a mutually respectful and collaborative relationship. Reflective practice offers a model that links research and practice in new ways that can be mutually respectful and mutually beneficial.

Characteristics of Reflective Practice

A second dimension of the model of reflective practice is a description of reflective practice that focuses on the essential characteristics of the practitioner in action (Dokecki, 1996). The essential characteristics of the reflective practitioner include the following:

1. The reflective practitioner recognizes the **ethical nature** of working with fathers and families.
2. The reflective practitioner maintains a **central focus on the goals of enhancing human development and promoting the common good**.
3. The reflective practitioner takes **responsibility for establishing collaborative relationships** with fathers/families and researchers to improve practice.
4. The reflective practitioner takes **responsibility for continuing to develop technical expertise** based on research, theory, and practice.
5. The reflective practitioner **acknowledges the critical role of artistry/intuition in practice** and works to better understand and enhance this artistry.

This description of reflective practice attempts to clarify and raise the standards in the field. This description also creates a new model for thinking about good practice that includes ongoing development and artistry as well as technical skills.

Virtue Ethics and Reflective Practice

A third dimension of reflective practice involves the individual character of the practitioner. This perspective on ethical practice is taken from virtue ethics (Jordan & Meara, 1990). Virtue ethics includes a focus on moral competence and dispositions to do the right things for the right reasons. The virtue ethics approach to ethical issues raises the question of what kind of person practitioners should be while working in the swampland. Some of the virtues that may be most relevant (Palm, 1994) in working with fathers and families in the 1990s are:

1. **Caring-** the disposition to enhance the welfare of fathers and family members as agents of their own lives.
2. **Hope/Optimism-** the disposition to notice strengths in fathers and family members and to stress positive potential.
3. **Prudence-** the disposition to understand competing needs and make difficult and complex decisions based on reflection and consultation.
4. **Patience/Persistence-** the disposition to accept fathers and families where they are and to give time for growth and change to occur.

Agenda for Practitioner/Researcher Collaboration

One of the critical supports for reflective practice is collaboration between practitioners and researchers. The following activities are suggested as some practical steps to pro-

mote a closer relationship between practitioners and researchers.

1. **Development of Quality Indicators.** This project would involve a careful review of both research and practice literature to develop a set of indicators for fathering programs that could be used by programs as a self-assessment tool. It is an opportunity to bring research and practice together to identify practices in effective programs.

2. **Development of ethical thinking and practice.** One of the important points articulated in the reflective practice model is the pervasiveness of ethical issues in working with fathers and families. This is an area where the traditional approaches to developing codes of ethics based on principles may not be adequate. Practitioners and researchers/theorists could join together to design more relevant and useful approaches to ethical understanding and practice (Palm, 1994).

3. **Identification of staff knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to reflective practice.** As the need for fathering programs increases, practitioners and researchers can come together to outline some of the specific technical skills and knowledge that are most important for practitioners (Cooke, Danforth, Foster, Palm, Rossman, & Wolthius, 1995). Pre-service and in-service training for staff must be designed around a core knowledge base. Practitioners have an important role in identifying knowledge, skills, and dispositions that support reflective practice.

4. **Examine virtues most relevant to practitioners working with fathers.** The development of a virtue ethics for practitioners working in fathering programs is another area where theorists/researchers and practitioners could come together to identify the essential set of virtues that are most important and relevant to supporting reflective practice (Jordan & Meara, 1990).

5. **Exploration of artistry/intuition of practitioners.** Practitioners and researchers can join together to develop methods to better understand the development and application of artistry (Schon, 1987) and intuition as part of reflective practice in fathering programs. This provides researchers with a new area of study and gives credibility to non-technical skills that reflective practitioners have developed.

6. **Study of successful collaborations of researchers and practitioners in fathering programs.** Another area of study is to identify activities in fathering programs that have successfully brought researchers and practitioners together and improved their relationships.

7. **Program evaluation.** Program evaluation in fathering programs is still sparse (McBride, 1990, 1991) and offers some interesting opportunities for researchers and practitioners to work together to develop new instruments and processes for evaluating programs.

Summary

This paper has articulated a model of reflective practice that can be applied to a wide variety of fathering programs. This model includes a definition of good fathering as generative fathering that addresses the inherent tensions of absolutist and relativist approaches. The model of reflective practice provides a new way of thinking about professionalism. The major challenge of this model is for both researchers and practitioners to construct or rebuild a relationship based on mutual respect for each other's work and perspectives. There are a number of concrete activities that are suggested as collaborative projects for researchers and practitioners. Reflective practice as a conceptual framework has the potential to help improve current practice by emphasizing the importance of practitioner relationships, acknowledging the complexity of goals in fathering programs, and exploring the artistry of practitioners.

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Upcoming Events

Moving From Rhetoric to Action:
National Summit on Fatherhood
 Washington, D.C. - June 15, 1998

Convened by the National Fatherhood Initiative and by the Congressional, and Governors' Bi-partisan Task Forces on Fatherhood Promotion "the purpose of the summit is to mobilize a response to father absence in several of the most powerful sectors of American society, including public and private social services, education, religion, entertainment and the media, the civic community, public policy, and more. The summit will result in the establishment of achievable goals for each of the sectors involved, and will conclude with a fresh call to action as we approach the 21st century."

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Children and Families in an Era of Rapid Change: Creating a Shared Agenda for Researchers, Practitioners, and Policymakers
 Washington, D.C. - July 9-12, 1998

Sponsored by the Administration of Children, Youth and Families, the Administration for Children and Families, Columbia University School of Public Health, Center for Population and Family Health, and the Society for Research in Child Development, the purpose of this conference is to bring together those involved in key research with those in leadership positions in the Administration for Children and Families and other relevant government groups, national organizations in early childhood, as well as the leadership of Head Start. A major goal is to facilitate interaction among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in order for them to better understand how research may be applied to effective programming and policy for low-income families.

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